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Remarks as Prepared

Introduction

This past May, a man walked into a Jewish Museum in Belgium and opened fire, killing four. The suspect, a 29-year old French-national, had recently returned from Syria, where he fought alongside the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant.

The next day, a 22-year old American from Florida blew himself up while detonating a massive truck bomb in a restaurant in northern Syria, one frequented by Syrian soldiers. The bomb killed dozens. The American suicide bomber was with al-Nusrah Front—an al-Qa’ida affiliate—and the group posted a video of the attack online.

Finally, over the past two weeks, an ISIL terrorist—probably of British origin—executed two American journalists, who were taken hostage while covering the plight of the Syrian people. ISIL then posted these images for the world to see.

Let me pause here and echo the words of the President this morning. On behalf of everyone at NCTC, our prayers are with the families of Steven Sotloff and James Foley today.

Taken together, these horrific acts of violence highlight why security and intelligence officials in the United States, across Europe, and around the world are alarmed about the rise of ISIL and the terrorism threats emanating from Syria and Iraq—threats to both those in the region and to the West.

Last week and again this morning, the President spoke directly these concerns, calling ISIL an “immediate threat to the people of Iraq and people throughout the region.” Likewise, the British Prime Minister announced that the UK was raising their threat level, citing information that ISIL is targeting Europe.

So, this morning, I would like to spend a few minutes talking about the nature of the terrorism threat we see in Syria and Iraq. I will talk about the rise of ISIL and some of the challenges we face, but also why ISIL is far from invincible.

I will discuss how the situation in Syria and Iraq fits into the overall terrorism landscape, as I try to place this into a broader context.

Finally, I will touch on some of the steps we’re taking to confront ISIL and other groups operating in Syria to address the threats they pose to our security.

Before I begin, let me thank Bruce and the Brookings Institution for inviting me here to speak and also to acknowledge the terrific work that Brookings does on the full range of terrorism and intelligence issues. There’s a natural connection between NCTC and Brookings, given our role at NCTC as the primary government organization for all-source analysis of terrorism information. Indeed, we’ve sent some of our best and brightest here to serve as fellows.

As the Director of NCTC, I believe that our role includes talking to groups like this about our analysis and sharing our insights. This summer, the 9/11 Commissioners released their most recent report and asked national security leaders to “communicate to the public—in specific terms—what the threat is, and how it is evolving.” I see this event as an opportunity to do this and to shed some measure of light on the current discourse concerning ISIL.





The ISIL Threat

There's no doubt that the American public is gripped with news about the violence in Syria and Iraq. This is completely understandable, particularly in light of yesterday's video release.

By all measures, ISIL is an extremely dangerous organization operating in a chaotic part of the world. It has exploited the conflict in Syria and sectarian tensions in Iraq to entrench itself in both countries, now spanning the geographic center of the Middle East. The group uses both terrorist and insurgent tactics, and like an insurgency, it has seized and is trying to govern territory.

ISIL poses a direct and significant threat to us—and to Iraqi and Syrian civilians—in the region and potentially to us here at home. The group's rapid success on the battlefield, its brutal tactics, and its claim to be the new ideological leader of the global extremist movement—all account for our intense focus on the group and the threat it presents. And beyond ISIL, other terrorist networks in Syria pose a threat to us, even as we continue to monitor terrorist organizations across the Middle East and North Africa.

So how do we at NCTC assess the threat from ISIL?

Let's begin with the background of ISIL. The veteran Sunni terrorist, Abu Mus'ab al-Zarqawi, founded the group in 2004 and pledged his allegiance to bin Laden. Al Qaeda in Iraq, as it was then known, targeted U.S. forces and civilians using suicide bombers, car bombs, and executions to pressure the U.S. and other countries to leave Iraq. It gained a reputation for brutality and tyranny.

In 2007, ISIL's continued targeting and repression of Sunni civilians in Iraq caused a widespread backlash—often referred to as the Sunni Awakening—against the group. This coincided with a surge in U.S. and coalition forces and Iraq counterterrorism operations that ultimately denied ISIL safe haven and led to a sharp decrease in its attack tempo.

Then in 2011, the group began to reconstitute itself amid growing Sunni discontent and the civil war in Syria. In 2012, ISIL conducted an average of 5-10 suicide attacks per month. And by last summer that number grew to 30-40 attacks per month.

While gaining strength in Iraq, ISIL exploited the conflict and chaos in Syria to expand its operations across the border. The group established the al-Nusrah Front as a cover for its activities in Syria, and in April 2013, the group publicly declared its presence in Syria under the ISIL name. Al Nusrah leaders immediately rejected ISIL's announcement and publicly pledged allegiance to al-Qaeda and Zawahiri. And by February of this year, al-Qaeda declared that ISIL was no longer a branch of the group.

At the same time, ISIL accelerated its efforts to overthrow the Iraqi government, seizing control of Fallujah in January. The group marched from its safe haven in Syria, across the border into northern Iraq, slaughtering thousands of Iraqi Muslims, Sunni and Shia alike on its way to seizing Mosul this June. Through these battlefield victories, the group gained weapons, equipment, and territory, as well as an extensive war chest. ISIL takes in as much as one million dollars per day from illicit oil sales, smuggling and ransom payments.

By late June, ISIL declared the establishment of an Islamic caliphate under the name the "Islamic State" and called for all Muslims to pledge support to the group and its leader, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi.

Three overarching factors account for the rise and success of ISIL

First, ISIL has exploited the failure of the Syrian and Iraqi states to maintain political and military control over their more remote regions. Additionally, Assad's brutal treatment of his own people and misuse of the resources of his country to forcibly suppress the moderate opposition acted as a magnet for extremists and foreign fighters.

In western Iraq, the withdrawal of security forces during the initial military engagements with ISIL left swaths of territory largely ungoverned. ISIL used these areas to establish sanctuaries in Syria and Iraq from where the group could plan, train, and plot and amass and coordinate fighters and weapons with little interference. And with no security forces along the Iraq-Syria border, ISIL has been able to move personnel and supplies within its held territories with ease.





Second, ISIL has proven to be an effective fighting force. Its battlefield strategy is complex and adaptive, employing a mix of terrorist operations, hit-and-run tactics, and paramilitary assaults to enable the group's rapid gains. These battlefield advances, in turn, have sparked other Sunni insurgents into action, and they have helped the group hold and administer territory. Indeed, disaffected Sunnis have few alternatives in Iraq or Syria. The leadership in both countries has pushed them to the sidelines in the political process for years, failing to address their grievances. ISIL has been recruiting these young Sunnis to fight.

Third, ISIL views itself as the new leader of the global jihad. It operates the most sophisticated propaganda machine of any extremist group. ISIL disseminates timely, high-quality media content on multiple platforms, including on social media, designed to secure a widespread following for the group. We have seen ISIL use a range of media to tout its military capabilities, executions of captured soldiers, and consecutive battlefield victories. More recently, the group's supporters have sustained this momentum on social media by encouraging attacks in the U.S. and against U.S. interests in retaliation for our airstrikes. ISIL has used this propaganda campaign to draw foreign fighters to the group, including many from Western countries. As a result, ISIL threatens to outpace al-Qa'ida as the dominant voice of influence in the global extremist movement.

Today, ISIL has more than 10,000 fighters and controls much of the Tigris-Euphrates basin—the crossroads of the Middle East—an area similar in size to the UK. And its strategic goal is to establish an Islamic caliphate through armed conflict with governments it considers apostate—including Iraq, Syria, and the United States.

From this position, ISIL poses a multi-faceted threat to the United States. In January, ISIL's leader warned that the U.S. will soon "be in direct conflict" with the group, and there's little doubt that ISIL views the U.S. as a strategic enemy.

This threat is most acute in Iraq. The group's safe haven and resources present an immediate and direct threat to Americans there. This includes our embassy in Baghdad and our consulate in Erbil—and, of course, it includes the Americans held hostage by ISIL. In the region—in Lebanon, Jordan, and Turkey—ISIL also has the capability to carry out small-scale attacks and to threaten Americans as a result.

But the ISIL threat extends beyond the region to the West. ISIL has the potential to use its safe haven to plan and coordinate attacks in Europe and the U.S. This threat became real this past year with the shooting in the Brussels museum by an ISIL fighter and with the arrest of an individual in France who was connected to ISIL and possessed several explosive devices.

At this point, we have no credible information that ISIL is planning to attack the U.S. But we do know that more than 12,000 foreign fighters have flocked to Syria over the past three years, including more than a thousand Europeans and more than one hundred Americans. Many of these foreign fighters have joined ISIL's ranks, and the group may use these fighters to conduct external attacks.

These foreign fighters are likely to gain experience and training and eventually to return to their home countries battle-hardened and further radicalized. Many are likely to possess Western passports and travel documents.

The FBI has arrested more than half a dozen individuals seeking to travel from the U.S. to Syria to support ISIL. And we remain mindful of the possibility that an ISIL-sympathizer—perhaps motivated by online propaganda—could conduct a limited, self-directed attack here at home with no warning.

In our view, any threat to the U.S. homeland from these types of extremists is likely to be limited in scope and scale.





Overall Terrorist Threat

As dire as this all sounds, from my vantage point it is imperative that we keep this threat in perspective and consider it in the context of the overall terrorist landscape.

The rise of ISIL can be viewed as one manifestation of the transformation of the global jihadist movement over the past several years. We have seen this movement diversify and expand in the aftermath of the upheaval and political chaos in the Arab world since 2010.

The threat now comes from a decentralized array of organizations and networks—ISIL is only one of the groups that we're concerned about. Al-Qa'ida core continues to support attacking the West and for now remains the recognized leader of the global jihad, even as it struggles to mount operations under sustained pressure.

In Syria, veteran al-Qa'ida fighters have traveled from Pakistan to take advantage of the permissive operating environment and access to foreign fighters. They are focused on plotting against the West.

Al-Qa'ida's official branches in Yemen and Somalia remain extremely active. Over the past five years, al-Qa'ida in the Arabian Peninsula has repeatedly attempted to blow up planes bound for the U.S., while at the same time targeting U.S. personnel in Yemen. AQAP retains both the intent and capability to carry out a significant terrorist attack against the U.S. AQAP's amir is now a leader within al-Qa'ida, and the group's propaganda continues to resonate with extremists outside Yemen. And al-Shabaab maintains a safe haven in Somalia and threatens U.S. and Western personnel in the region, even with the group's losses since 2011.

Al-Qa'ida in the Islamic Magreb has taken advantage of the security vacuum and flow of weapons across porous borders to unify extremists in North and West Africa. Boko Haram is carrying out unprecedented levels of violence in Nigeria ahead of that country's elections next year.

And here in the United States, last year's bombing of the Boston Marathon is a sober reminder of the sustained threat we face from self-directed violent extremists.

As you can see, the terrorist threat emanates from a broad geographic area, spanning South Asia across the Middle East, and much of North Africa. Terrorist networks have exploited the lack of governance and lax security in these areas. Terrorist groups are now active in at least 11 insurgencies in the Islamic world. These groups contribute to the insurgencies and exploit governments' inability to fight on multiple fronts.

Finally, identifying and disrupting these threats is increasingly challenging. These groups are adapting their tactics to overcome our defenses and avoid our intelligence collection. Terrorist groups are looking for simpler, smaller scale attacks that are easier to pull off, such as the al-Shabaab attack last year at the Westgate mall in Nairobi.

And following the disclosure of the stolen NSA documents, terrorists are changing how they communicate to avoid surveillance. They are moving to more secure communications platforms, using encryption, and avoiding electronic communications altogether. This is a problem for us in many areas where we have limited human collection and depend on intercepted communications to identify and disrupt plots.

The point is this: ISIL has captured our immediate focus, but it is only one of the myriad groups that pose a threat to us, as the terrorist picture evolves and becomes increasingly complex and challenging.

U.S. Strategy against ISIL

With this context in mind, I want to spend the last few minutes talking about our strategy to confront and ultimately defeat ISIL. As formidable as ISIL is as a group, it is not invincible. Working in concert with a broad coalition of international partners, we have the tools to defeat ISIL based on a determined and comprehensive all-of-government approach.





In the near term, we are focused on protecting our personnel on the ground in Iraq—including our advisors and our embassy staff—while addressing the humanitarian crisis created by ISIL.

Our military is taking the fight to ISIL. To date we've conducted more than 120 air strikes in support of Iraqi and Kurdish security forces, and provided the necessary air support to allow these forces to protect and regain key towns and infrastructure. Because of the success of these strikes, ISIL is losing arms, equipment, and territory. These measures by Iraqi, Kurdish, and U.S. forces have revealed that ISIL is vulnerable to coordinated and effective military action. The strikes have begun to sap ISIL's momentum and created the space for Iraqi and Kurdish forces to take the offensive.

In addition, over the last few weeks the United States and its allies have provided over a million pounds of supplies—including food, water, and medicine—to isolated civilian populations who were under siege by ISIL in Sinjar and Amerli. These steps have helped to avert humanitarian catastrophes in these locations.

At the same time, as the President has stated, there is no purely military solution to countering ISIL. Targeted military action and humanitarian aid must be part of a broader strategy over the long term, consistent with the approach the President set out at West Point in May. We are clear-eyed about the threat ISIL poses both inside and outside the region. We are implementing a comprehensive strategy that calls for a global coalition using all tools—diplomatic, military, intelligence, and law enforcement—to defeat the group.

This effort starts with Iraq's leaders. Only a government in Iraq that is representative of all Iraqis and will make the necessary political reforms to unite the country will be effective in combating the group. We have concentrated on working with Iraqis and international partners to ensure that the new Iraqi government stands for all Iraqis. An inclusive Iraqi government that represents Sunnis, Shias, and Kurds alike will reduce sectarian tensions throughout the region—not just within Iraq—and demonstrate to marginalized Sunnis that there is a viable alternative to ISIL's governance. In recent weeks, Iraqis have made progress toward this goal, naming a new prime minister.

This strategy also requires regional and international partners. Some nations will provide military assistance, direct and indirect, while others will provide humanitarian assistance. This effort is underway in Iraq, where other countries have joined us in providing humanitarian aid, military assistance and support for an inclusive government.

This week at the NATO Summit, Secretary Kerry and Secretary Hagel will meet with their counterparts to enlist the broadest possible assistance, and both Secretaries will then travel to the Middle East to develop more support for this coalition. As Secretary Kerry observed, "No decent country can support the horrors perpetrated by ISIL, and no civilized country should shirk its responsibility to help stamp out this disease."

A broad international consensus against ISIL will provide the foundation for concerted action to achieve multiple objectives.

First, we will continue to take direct action, both unilaterally and in concert with our partners, to degrade ISIL's capacity to wage war and diminish its territorial control in both Iraq and Syria.

Next, we are continuing our support for Iraqi and Kurdish security forces and for the moderate Syrian opposition. They are facing ISIL on the front lines.

Third, we will counter ISIL's extremist message campaign by working with partners to emphasize the battlefield successes of Iraqi and Kurdish forces and to highlight ISIL's atrocities and the grave threat the group poses to Iraqi Sunnis.

Finally, we will enhance our intelligence collection within the region and build on established security measures at home to combat any threat here. This includes working to stem the flow of foreign fighters to Syria and Iraq.





Conclusion

In sum, our attention is concentrated on the security crises in Iraq and Syria—and rightly so. ISIL and other groups in Syria threaten our people and interests in the region and, left unchecked, they will seek to carry out attacks closer to home. But no terrorist group, certainly not ISIL, is invincible.

The slaughter of tens of thousands of innocent Syrian and Iraqi civilians has shocked and united all civilized peoples, while the barbaric murders of two American journalists and the attack at a Jewish museum in Brussels have demonstrated that these terrorist threats are not confined to one part of the globe.

As the President has set out, the U.S. will continue to do whatever is necessary to protect Americans at home and abroad, while we work with the Iraqis, our partners in the region, and our allies over the long term to bring peace and security to a chaotic region of the world

